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Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to thank Loretta Bass, Emily Ryo, Martin Wulfe, Miguel Ruiz, Nathaniel Herda, and the attendees of Liberal Arts Faculty Research Workshop at Merrimack College. This research was funded in part by a Merrimack College Faculty Development Grant.

Comparing Ignorance: Imagined Immigration and the Exclusion of Migrants in the U.S. and Western Europe

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Keywords: immigrants; misperceptions; undocumented immigration; stereotypes; ignorance; United States; Western Europe

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Abstract

There exists a well-documented tendency among citizens to perceive immigrant populations as much larger than indicated by official statistics. This misperception has been linked to desires to halt the flow of immigration or restrict immigrants' rights, raising concern about the consequences of pervasive faulty information. However, ignorance extends beyond questions of population size. There are also many qualitative misperceptions upon which individuals base their opinions about foreigners. In particular, citizens are likely to hold incorrect perceptions about the legal status of the typical immigrant (i.e., documented vs undocumented). The current study takes a unique approach by simultaneously examining both quantitative and qualitative forms of ignorance, and assessing their associations with respondents' willingness to exclude migrants. Using a sample of 2,363 from the 2011 Transatlantic Trends Immigration Survey gathered in six countries – the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy – this study finds high levels of both forms of ignorance. However, legal status misperceptions exhibit greater variation across countries and are strongly associated with more exclusionary attitudes. Contrary to the extant literature, size misperceptions are only weakly associated with the outcome. Overall, the results highlight a need for a more complete understanding of the totality of misperceptions to elucidate the connection between ignorance and anti-immigrant attitudes.

Keywords: immigrants; misperceptions; undocumented immigration; stereotypes; ignorance; United States; Western Europe

Introduction

Social researchers have consistently found that when the typical individual thinks about immigrants, they imagine something quite different from the objective reality. Recent studies on misperceptions have focused a great deal on how people perceive their country's immigrant population size; a statistic that respondents usually over-estimate. (Hjerm 2007; Semyonov, Rajjman, Yom Tov and Schmidt 2004; Semyonov, Rajjman and Gorodzeisky 2008; Sides and Citrin 2007; Citrin and Sides 2008). This tendency (sometimes referred to as population innumeracy) has generated increased scholarly attention and is now measured in multiple national and international surveys (Ipsos 2015; Transatlantic Trends 2013; Teixeira et al. 2013; Jowell 2005). Most concerning is the finding that when inflated perceptions are common, support for anti-immigrant policy is more prevalent (Sides and Citrin 2007; Semyonov et al. 2004). Logically, this association has led some to call for the dissemination of correct population size information to improve intergroup relations and to aid in the integration of immigrant populations (Alba, Rumbaut, and Marotz 2005; Nadeau, Niemi, and Levine 1993; Sides and Citrin 2007; Sigelman and Niemi 2001).

The effectiveness of such a strategy is uncertain, however, in part because misperceptions regarding immigrants are much wider in scope than inflated population numbers. Blinder's (2015) concept of the "imagined immigration" suggests that individuals have a more comprehensive, albeit, inaccurate understanding of what is meant by the word "immigrant" and whom it represents. In other words, ignorance extends beyond questions of population size to **also** include qualitative mischaracterizations of the typical immigrant. Perceptions of the typical foreigner's country of origin, their reasons for being present in the host country, their socio-economic status, or their likelihood of criminality, among many other possible things, may be perceived incorrectly. Blinder (2015) argues that immigrant-related public opinion is formed around this imagined immigration rather than objective reality. Thus, if in the minds of individuals, the typical immigrant is something undesirable, it may, like size misperceptions, lead to support of exclusionary immigration policies or the erosion of immigrants' rights.

While population size misperceptions have been studied extensively (Citrin and Sides 2008; Hjerm 2007; Semyonov, et al. 2004; Semyonov, et al. 2008; Sides and Citrin 2007) they have yet to be considered alongside qualitative components of the imagined immigration. It remains unknown whether these different types of ignorance shape attitudes and policy positions similarly or if one is more important than the other. Using data from the six countries included in the 2011 Transatlantic Trends Immigration Survey (TATIS) the current study provides a more complete understanding of immigrant-related ignorance by considering whether all misperceptions are created equal. Specifically, the analysis compares the over-estimation of immigrant population sizes and mischaracterizations of the typical immigrants' legal statuses. It then simultaneously assesses the effects of these two misperceptions on a measure of respondents' willingness to exclude immigrants from their country.

Legal status mischaracterizations are a potentially important qualitative component of the imagined immigration, as the question of documentation versus no documentation is highly contentious, especially in the U.S. (Lyons, Coursey, and Kenworthy 2013; Berg 2009; Hood and Morris 1998; Goo 2015). It is also likely prone to faulty perceptions given an abundance of media attention on unauthorized immigration, particularly when focusing on Latino/as (Subervi, Torres, and Montalvo 2005; Timberlake and Williams 2012). Controversy surrounding undocumented immigrants has also increased in Europe, particularly in the wake of the 2015

Migration Crisis, as individuals from outside the E.U. have increasingly sought refuge and opportunity within the Schengen area (Duvell 2008; Morehouse and Blomfield 2011). The current study considers legal status mischaracterizations alongside population size misperceptions in an effort to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ignorance regarding immigrants.

Ignorance about Foreign-Born Populations

Population Size Misperceptions: Quantitative Ignorance

Several studies have demonstrated ordinary citizens' uncertainty about immigrant and racial minority population sizes (Hjerm 2007; Semyonov, et al. 2004; Semyonov, et al. 2008; Sides and Citrin 2007; Citrin and Sides 2008; Alba, Rumbaut, and Marotz 2005; Wong 2007; Herda 2010; Kunovich 2017). Generally, when asked how large these populations are, respondents provide over-estimates. This phenomenon has generated considerable interest among social scientists because it suggests that the reality perceived by individuals differs, often greatly, from objective data. In a recent report from Ipsos MORI (2015), over-estimation on average was nearly ubiquitous across 32 nations. In the U.S., where immigrants represent about 14 percent of the population, the typical respondent perceives 33 percent of the country to be foreign born. Thus, the average American sees the immigrant population as 19 percentage points larger than (2.36 times) the reality. Likewise, in Italy respondents overestimated by 17 percentage points on average, in France and Germany by 14 points, in Britain by 12 points, and in Spain by 9 percentage points (Ipsos 2015).

The commonplace nature of size misperceptions has generated concern that individuals will use inaccurate information to motivate anti-immigrant actions or formulate anti-immigrant policy positions. The theoretical logic is often couched in group threat theory (Blumer 1958; Blalock 1967; Bobo 1983; Quillian 1995; 1996), which predicts that a greater objective number of perceived competitors for the dominant group will raise a sense of vulnerability, or threat, regarding control over social resources (i.e., neighborhoods, schools, marriage markets, etc.). This sense of threat generates negative prejudice and discriminatory actions. Following this logic, the larger the immigrant population appears in one's mind, the more likely one will express feelings of group threat, regardless of the actual population size. This heightened threat should increase support for exclusionary immigration policy. Indeed, researchers using European samples have found that over-estimates are associated with support for measures that would stop or limit the flow of immigration (Sides and Citrin 2007), deport immigrants under various circumstances (Herda 2013), and curtail immigrants' rights (Semyonov et al. 2004).

While size misperceptions regarding immigrants have been documented in the U.S., their connection to immigrant policy positions remains understudied. Instead, research on misperceptions about racial minority communities is more common (Nadeau, Niemi, and Levine 1993; Sigelman and Niemi 2001; Kunovich 2017) and some find similar links to policy positions. In particular, Alba, Rumbaut, and Marotz's (2005) analysis of the General Social Survey revealed that inflated perceptions of African American and Latino populations predict opposition to affirmative action and the rejection of policies designed to help immigrants respectively.

The Imagined Immigration: Qualitative Ignorance

Of course, ignorance regarding immigrants extends beyond questions of population size. There are also many qualitative characteristics about which citizens will demonstrate confusion. In general, the existing research suggests that the specific characteristics that individuals imagine when they think of the typical immigrant, whether accurate or inaccurate, will also inform their attitudes and policy positions.

Blinder (2015) considered perceptions of why immigrants are present in Britain using survey data and official government statistics. His results revealed widespread qualitative misunderstanding about the perceived reasons for the typical immigrant's presence. At the time of the study, "student" was the most likely status for immigrants, but "asylum seeker" was the most likely perception among the 728 respondents (note that labor migrants have since overtaken students as the largest proportion in Britain). Further, according to official statistics, most immigrants to Britain have temporary, rather than permanent status. However, respondents were more likely to view the typical immigrant as permanent. Thus, similar to immigrant population size estimates, native-born individuals also perceive immigrants incorrectly in qualitative ways.

Blinder (2015) went on to argue that individuals base their immigrant-related attitudes and policy positions on the immigration that they imagine, rather than what actually exists. He found this to be the case in his data as those perceiving the typical immigrant to be an asylum seeker or having permanent status were more likely to endorse reductions in immigration. Thus, for anti-immigrant attitudes and policy positions, the specific immigrant that one imagines seems to be important.

Similarly, Herda's (2015) analysis of the Finnish National Election Survey found that many respondents in Finland also imagined immigration in a manner that differs from reality. Nearly one fifth of his 806 respondents incorrectly selected Somalia as the most common origin of immigrants in Finland. This perception is of course verifiable with official statistics, which indicate that Russia is the correct answer. This incorrectly imagined immigration is potentially consequential as Somalis represent a particularly maligned group in Finland (Pitkanen and Kouki 2002; Jaakkola 2005; Peutere 2010). If individuals think of Somalis when they choose to support or oppose immigration, their misperception may have implications for immigrants more generally. This relates to Ford's (2011) finding among British respondents of an ethnic hierarchy of preferences regarding immigrant populations. His analysis suggested that respondents preferred immigrants who were racially white and from cultures most proximate to that of Great Britain. The attitudes and policy preferences of these individuals will likely be shaped by what or whom they imagine when they think of the typical immigrant.

Of course, there are many things that individuals can imagine, correctly or incorrectly, when they think of immigrants. Social scientists have indeed focused on various immigrant stereotypes for decades (Lippmann 1946; Allport 1979). Individuals often rely on these simplistic and exaggerated notions to understand unfamiliar out-groups. Previous research has focused on the endorsement of stereotypes regarding immigrants' levels of criminality, occupational skills, work ethic, socioeconomic status, intelligence, and willingness to assimilate, among others (Ceobanu and Escandell 2010; Hagan and Palloni 1999; Reid et al. 2005; Espenshade and Hempstead 1996; Timberlake and Williams 2012; Adelman et al. 2017). Many find that agreeing with such stereotypes is associated with anti-immigrant attitudes and policy positions (Timberlake et al. 2015; Figgou et al. 2011; Pantoja 2006; Wilson 2001). Others have successfully used such stereotypes to experimentally prime subjects and alter attitudes about

hypothetical immigrants (Aalberg, Iyengar, and Messing 2012; Harell et al. 2012; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015).

Clearly these stereotypes are influential and each is a potentially relevant piece of the imagined immigration. Many of them are also demonstrably inaccurate (see Blinder 2015; Herda 2016), making them analogous to quantitative ignorance about population sizes. But are the consequences of being wrong about population size the same as being wrong about qualitative characteristics? If so, there exists a need to shift the recent population innumeracy research away from its sole focus on size perceptions to a more comprehensive analysis of the totality of respondents' immigrant-related ignorance. The current analysis moves in this direction by simultaneously considering quantitative misperceptions and qualitative mischaracterizations.

Documented or Undocumented?

The typical immigrant's legal status is a potentially important component of the imagined immigration and likely something that respondents will mischaracterize. Particularly in the U.S., the category of "illegal"¹ immigrant is controversial. Many hold especially negative attitudes toward the undocumented population (Lyons, Coursey, and Kenworthy 2013; Berg 2009; Hood and Morris 1998; Goo 2015; Espenshade and Calhoun 1993). If respondents view the typical immigrant as occupying this maligned status, it will likely associate strongly with a desire to restrict immigration. The current study considers this perception in the U.S. as well as Europe, where the topic of unauthorized migration has also become increasingly controversial (Morehouse and Blomfield 2011; Duvell 2008).

The stereotype characterizing the typical immigrant as undocumented has been observed in the U.S., particularly when researchers focus on Latino/a immigrants (Timberlake and Williams 2012; Espenshade and Hempstead 1996). For example, Masuoka and Junn (2013) demonstrated that a full 62 percent of whites in the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality endorsed the idea that Latino immigrants were "mostly illegal immigrants." However, researchers have not yet analyzed this misperception alongside over-estimates of the immigrant population size. Thus, it remains unknown whether qualitative and quantitative ignorance behave similarly or if one is more important than the other for predicting anti-immigrant preferences.

Undocumented Population Sizes

Undocumented immigration involves the unauthorized entry or continued presence of foreign nationals in a host country. When considering ignorance regarding this category of individuals, it is necessary to establish what is typical according to the best available data. Table 1 presents estimates of the total number of undocumented foreigners for each of the nations analyzed in the current study. It also includes the total foreign-born population size and the percentage undocumented, which is calculated by dividing the total by the number of undocumented. The dates of each estimate are included in parentheses. These particular dates were the most proximate available to the year 2011 (the year of the TATIS data). The American estimate is generated by Pew Research (2015) and matches that of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (Hoefer, Rytina, and Baker 2012). The European statistics were gathered from a variety of academic and governmental sources and have varying degrees of precision (see Clandestino 2012).² The table displays upper limit estimates in each of the countries listed to be as conservative as possible in determining the accuracy of respondents' perceptions.

The undocumented population around 2011 was the largest by a wide margin in the U.S. in both absolute and relative terms, with 27.36 percent of foreigners having “illegal” status. The numbers of this population increased sharply beginning in the 1990s reaching over 12 million individuals in 2005. It has remained relatively steady ever since, at about 11 million individuals (Krogstad and Passel 2015). Immigrants from Mexico generally receive the most attention in this regard, but they represent less than half of the undocumented population in the U.S. There are also significant undocumented immigration flows from other parts of Central America, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean (Henderson 2014).

Table 1. Estimated percentage of undocumented immigrants in each of the TATIS countries

	Undocumented/Irregular Migrants	Total Foreign Born Population	% Undocumented
U.S.	11.3 million ⁱ (2011)	41.3 million ⁱ (2011)	27.36%
Britain	863,000 ⁱⁱ (2008)	7.5 million ⁱⁱ (2011)	11.51%
Italy	651,000 ⁱⁱ (2008)	4.1 million ⁱⁱ (2012)	16.07%
France	400,000 ⁱⁱ (2005)	5.2 million ⁱⁱ (2007)	7.69%
Germany	400,000 ⁱⁱ (2010)	7.2 million ⁱⁱ (2010)	5.56%
Spain	390,000 ⁱⁱ (2009)	6.23 million ⁱⁱ (2009)	6.26%

i. Pew Research (2015)

ii. See Clandestino (2012) for more information. The British estimate is calculated by academic sources using a residual method with census data; the French estimate is from border and internal flow data from the Minister of the Interior; the Italian estimate is based on weighted survey methods from academic sources; the German estimate is compiled by academic sources based on police apprehension data; the Spanish estimated is compiled by Clandestino based on a residual method using municipal registration and residence permits.

Based on estimates from The Clandestino Project, Italy has the next largest relative proportion of foreign-born residents with undocumented status, at 16.07 percent. This is likely due to geography and its status as point of entry to the E.U. for migrants arriving from North Africa. This Central Mediterranean route was the most commonly used path into the Schengen Area prior to the recent migration crisis (Adams 2014). However, only Italy and Britain (11.51 percent) have foreign-born populations with greater than 10 percent classified as undocumented. Thus, even with Britain, France, and Germany acting as popular destinations for economic migrants, their undocumented populations are small compared to the United States.

Regardless, if one compares the estimated undocumented population to the total number of foreigners, the former represents a minority in every context. Even in the U.S. where the absolute undocumented population size is quite large, nearly three-quarters of foreign-born individuals have documentation. Thus, to view the typical immigrant as present “illegally” would be a mischaracterization in all six contexts. The following sections consider how respondents in these countries perceive these realities.

Data, Variables, and Methods

Data

The current analysis examines data from the 2011 TATIS, which is an international survey designed to “identify attitudes and policy preferences of the general public related to immigration in Europe and the United States” (Kennedy et al. 2011). As with previous misperceptions research, the cross-sectional design of the TATIS precludes assessment of temporality. However, the data uniquely permit the simultaneous analysis of both qualitative and quantitative immigrant-related misperceptions, which the existing literature has not considered. The sampling universe consists of individuals aged 18 and over, who have access to a landline telephone, with 20 percent of the sample being contacted via mobile numbers. Respondents were selected via multi-stage probability sampling. Interviews were conducted over the phone and in person between August and September of 2011. For the multivariate analysis, immigrants and those who did not respond to the size perception question are omitted. Further, the analysis only includes those who were selected to respond to the perceived size in one’s country question.³

Variables

Quantitative Ignorance: Population Size Perceptions

The measure of the respondents’ perceived immigrant population size is taken from a question asking: “In your opinion, what percentage of the total [country] population were born in another country?” Participants were directed to fill in a number between 0 and 100. A detailed description of this variable across the six sampled countries is provided in the analysis section.

Qualitative Ignorance: Legal Status Mischaracterizations

The measure of perceived legal status of the typical immigrant comes from a question asking: “In your opinion, do you think that most of the immigrants in the [country] are here legally or are most of them here illegally?” The three possible responses include: 1) “most immigrants are in the [country] legally”; 2) “most immigrants are in the [country] illegally”; and 3) “equal numbers of legal and illegal immigrants”. A detailed description of this variable across the six countries is presented in the analysis section below.⁴

Dependent Variable: Willingness to Exclude Migrants

Ultimately, the analysis will consider the association between these two misperception measures and an index of one’s willingness to exclude immigrants. The variable combines responses from four questions, each containing four options ranging from “strongly support” to “strongly oppose”. The items measure the circumstances under which respondents would allow foreigners into their country. These include: 1) “to avoid poverty”; 2) “to avoid political, ethnic, or religious persecution”; 3) “to avoid physical harm from armed conflict”; and 4) “to avoid the aftermath of a natural disaster”. These items are particularly timely as many describe the

motivations of the refugees who fled the Middle East and Africa for the E.U. during the 2015 Migration Crisis. While the data were collected before the crisis began, they provide valuable insights into the state of ignorance and attitudes toward immigrants in the West just prior to the influx of migrants. Using a factor analysis of polychoric correlations, the four component items load highly onto a single factor ($\alpha = .79$) with an eigenvalue above two ($\chi^2 = 4623.71$; $p = .000$). The final scale was generated using factor scores where higher values indicate more exclusionary attitudes and lower scores indicate more welcoming attitudes. Sample means for this and all other variables are included in Table 2. On average, respondents in Britain demonstrate the most exclusionary attitudes, with those in Spain exhibiting the most welcoming attitudes. The values in both countries are significantly ($p < .05$) larger and smaller respectively compared to each of the other countries in the sample.

Control Variables

As control variables, the multivariate analysis includes two measures of inter-group contact, which are thought to influence size perceptions in particular. As individuals encounter immigrants in their everyday lives, their experiences are thought to act as “evidence” that one can use to formulate a perception (see Tversky and Kahneman’s (1973) cognitive availability heuristic). Thus, one’s level of contact with immigrants is assumed to inform their perceptions.

Table 2: Means (Standard Deviations in Parentheses) and Percentages for Variables Considered across TATIS Countries

	U.S.	Britai n	France	German y	Spain	Italy
Willingness to Exclude Immigrants	2.20 (.89)	2.41 (.88)	2.23 (.67)	2.17 (.65)	1.95 (.71)	2.18 (.79)
Female	51.52 %	60.55 %	51.54 %	51.29%	47.55 %	51.63 %
Age	51.90 (17.29)	50.77 (17.16)	51.04 (16.60)	48.80 (16.67)	45.73 (14.93)	49.31 (16.73)
Education Level						
<i>Less than High School</i>	8.82% 34.81	14.41 %	41.84 %	42.76%	35.61 %	35.96 %
<i>High School Graduate</i>	% 41.07	% 35.16	% 20.81	21.46%	% 27.24	% 40.94
<i>College Graduate</i>	% 15.30	% 42.29	% 25.29	6.75%	% 33.11	% 20.60
<i>Post-Graduate</i>	% 15.30	8.13% %	% 12.07	29.03%	4.04% %	2.5% %
Political Conservatism	4.40 (1.57)	4.16 (1.42)	3.85 (1.43)	3.67 (1.13)	3.91 (1.65)	3.81 (1.59)
Locality						
<i>City</i>	16.15 %	14.60 %	14.06 %	22.09%	27.84 %	23.64 %
<i>Suburbs</i>	29.13	22.73	15.27	19.88%	11.32	12.95

	%	%	%		%	%
	35.18	41.32	33.47		30.57	50.63
<i>Small town</i>	%	%	%	34.97%	%	%
		18.47	32.20		29.43	11.39
<i>Country Village</i>	7.21%	%	%	19.63%	%	%
	12.33					
<i>Rural</i>	%	2.89%	5.00%	3.44%	.82%	1.40%
Immigrant Family						
	88.47	90.38	88.11		97.76	99.17
<i>Two Parents Native-Born</i>	%	%	%	88.55%	%	%
<i>One Parent Foreign-Born</i>	7.47%	5.58%	8.33%	6.16%	2.21%	.83%
<i>Two Parents Foreign-Born</i>	4.06%	4.05%	3.56%	5.29%	-----	-----
Immigrant Friends						
	28.27	36.72	21.85		25.65	43.65
<i>None</i>	%	%	%	28.22%	%	%
	55.84	52.16	66.03		63.87	47.65
<i>A few</i>	%	%	%	59.75%	%	%
	15.89	11.12	12.11		10.49	
<i>Many</i>	%	%	%	12.02%	%	8.70%
Observations	406	398	421	407	363	368

The first such variable in the current analysis measures the amount of immigrant friends in one's social network. The three-category variable includes responses of "No, none" (reference category), "Yes, a few", and "Yes, many". The second variable measures the amount of immigrants in one immediate family through parents' birthplace. The variable has three categories: 1) Your mother and father were born in [country] (reference category); 2) One of you parents was born outside of [country]; 3) Both of your parents were born outside of [country].

The multivariate models also include several demographic controls. Sex is measured dichotomously with male acting as the reference. Age is measured in years. Education is measured with four categories: less than high school, high school graduate (reference category), college graduate, and advanced degree. Political conservatism is an ordinal variable with seven categories ranging from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative". Residence type has five categories: big city (reference category), suburbs, small city, small town, country village, and farm/countryside. Finally, all models include a set of country-specific region fixed effects to account for possible within-country geographic variation. These are omitted from presentation.

Methods

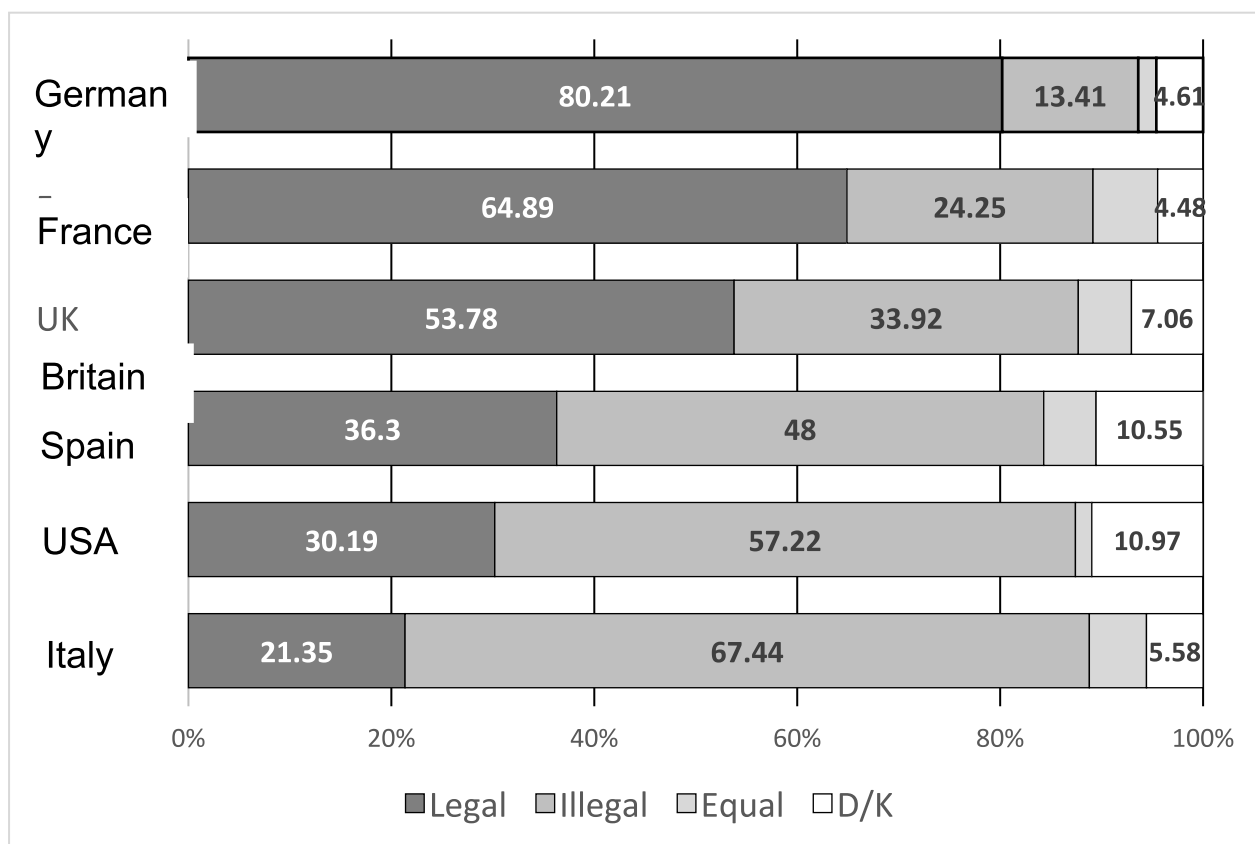
The analysis begins by documenting and comparing the extent of population size misperceptions and legal status mischaracterizations across the six countries. Next, the consequences of these misperceptions are assessed through country-specific multivariate regression models predicting willingness to exclude immigrants. Finally, predicted values are presented to compare the effect sizes of quantitative and qualitative ignorance. All analyses apply sample weights to ensure within-country representativeness and replace missing values through multiple imputation using 20 datasets.⁵

Analysis

The Extent of Ignorance across Countries

The horizontal bar chart in Figure 1 displays respondents' perceptions of the legal status of the typical immigrant within each country. Non-trivial percentages mischaracterize in each context. However, there is clearly a high degree of variability in accuracy with more than 80 percent of Germans correctly perceiving the typical immigrant as present legally, while only 21.35 percent of Italians do the same. The latter, along with the U.S. are the only two countries in which a majority of respondents perceive the typical immigrant as having undocumented status. While less than a majority does so in Spain, there are more Spaniards mischaracterizing than accurately perceiving the reality. Conversely, ignorance is lower in Britain and France where only one-third and one-quarter hold faulty perceptions respectively.

Figure 1. Perceived legal status of the typical immigrant in each of the 2011 TATIS countries



The extent of quantitative misperceptions is presented in Figure 2. The bar graph displays the mean estimated size within each country from the TATIS and the actual sizes gathered from Eurostat (2013) and Pew Research (2015). In all of the countries considered mean

estimates of the immigrant population size exceed the actual sizes. Over-estimation is most extreme in the U.S. where respondents perceive the immigrant population size to be nearly three times larger than the reality. The typical American overestimates by 25.22 percentage points. Estimates are most accurate in Spain where the actual size is overestimated by about 50 percent on average, which corresponds to 7.21 percentage points. Respondents in Britain overestimate by 19.72 percentage points, in France by 12.37 points, Germany by 15.1 points, and Italy by 14.39 percentage points.

Figure 2. Perceived and actual immigrant population sizes in each of the 2011 TATIS countries

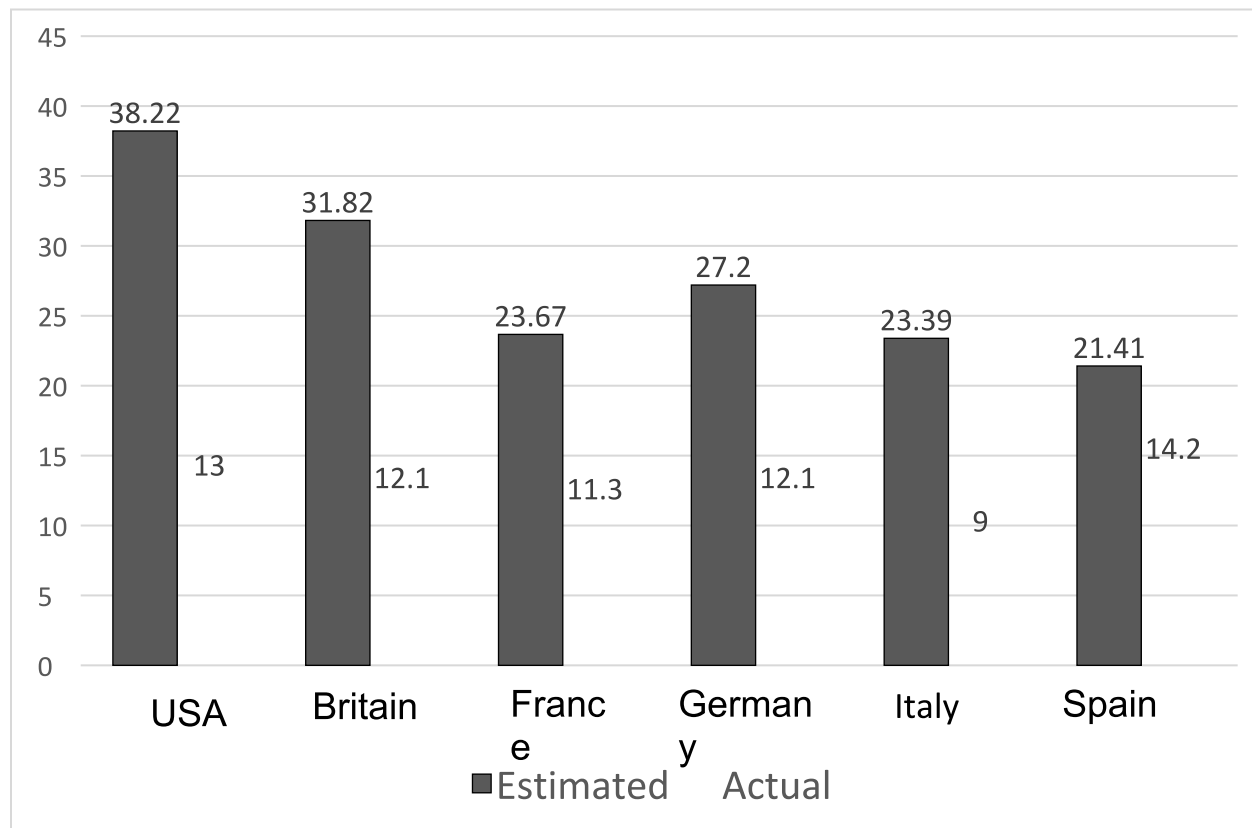
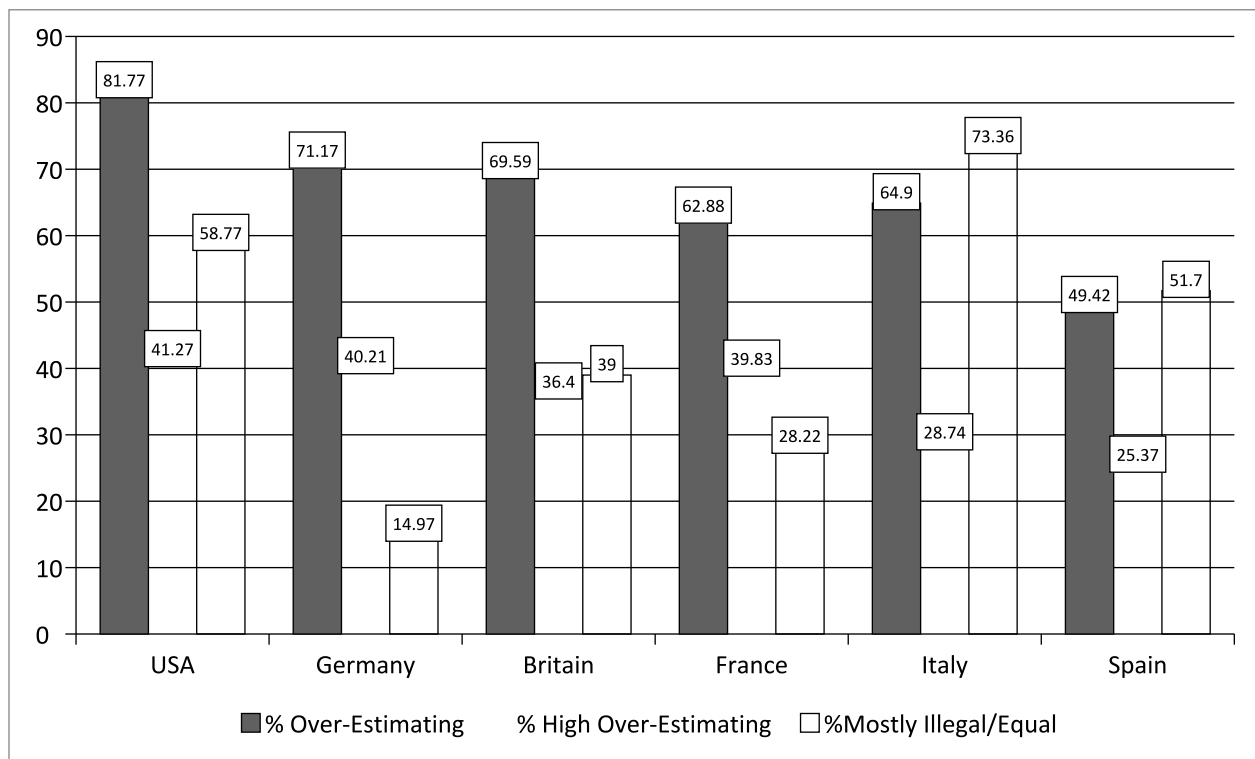


Figure 3 provides a comparison of the pervasiveness of the two perceptions of interest. From left-to-right, the three bars indicate: 1) the percentage of respondents whose estimate constitutes an over-estimate by any amount (relative to actual sizes); 2) the percentage over-estimating by an amount that exceeds their country's mean estimate (see the solid bars in Figure 2); and 3) the percent mischaracterizing the typical immigrant's legal status (the options "mostly illegal" and "equal numbers legal and illegal"). The results show that in most countries, over-estimation is more common than legal status mischaracterizations. The difference is most striking in Germany where over 70 percent over-estimate, while only about 15 percent mischaracterize. In fact, Germans are more likely to offer an above average over-estimate (larger than 27.2 percent) than to mischaracterize the typical immigrant's legal status. A similar pattern

is observed in France. However, in both Italy and Spain, legal status mischaracterizations are more common than over-estimation. In the former, nearly 65 percent over-estimate the immigrant population size, but more than 73 percent mischaracterize the typical immigrant's legal status. Thus, it appears that the pervasiveness and character of misperceptions vary across contexts.

Figure 3. Percentages Over-Estimating, Over-Estimating above the Country Mean Estimate, and Perceiving the Typical Immigrant to be Present Illegally or Equally Legal and Illegal



Ignorance and the Desire to Exclude Immigrants

Table 3 displays the associations between both misperceptions of interest and the willingness to exclude immigrants using least squares regression. Beginning with the U.S., relative to those with accurate perceptions, those viewing the typical immigrant as having illegal status are predicted to be .341 points higher ($p < .001$) on the outcome, suggesting that they exhibit more exclusionary attitudes. The effect corresponds to nearly one-third of a standard deviation on the dependent variable scale (see Table 2), making it a sizable association. This significance holds net of population size perceptions, the controls listed in Table 2, and region fixed effects. The “mostly illegal” point estimates are even larger in Great Britain ($b = .512$; $p < .001$) and France ($b = .385$; $p < .001$), although each of the 95 percent confidence intervals overlap indicating statistical equivalence across contexts. The pattern is similar in Italy ($p < .05$) and Germany ($p < .10$), with slightly smaller magnitudes. Spain is the only country without a

statistically significant “mostly illegal” association ($p = .366$). Viewing the immigrant population as equal parts documented and undocumented or not knowing, both of which are also misperceptions, are associated significantly with the outcome in France only. Their associations are similar to that of the “most illegal” coefficient.

While recent scholarship has focused heavily on size misperceptions and consistently links them to support for anti-immigrant policy views, their effects on the current dependent variable are mixed. For one, the size perception coefficient reaches significance in the direction expected only in Italy.⁶ A single percentage point increase in immigrant population size estimates is associated with a .006 unit increase on the willingness to exclude migrants index. Stated another way, a 10 percentage point increase in size estimates corresponds to about 7 percent of a standard deviation on the dependent variable scale. This association is marginally significant ($p < .10$). The same effect fails to reach significance in the Britain, Germany, Spain, France, and the U.S. Further, in two latter nations, the point estimates are actually negative in direction.

In Britain the average respondent would need to perceive the immigrant population to be over 170.65 percent of the country to match the willingness to exclude value of someone perceiving immigrants to be “mostly illegal”. Of course, this hypothetical estimate is mathematically impossible. However, it demonstrates a greater importance of legal status mischaracterizations in terms of consequences for immigrant policy preferences. The required size estimate of 170.65 is about 14.1 times the actual population size (12.1 percent) and more than 5 times the mean estimated size (31.8 percent). The pattern in the German sample is similar, but with reduced magnitude. A German respondent would need to estimate immigrants to be 120.5 percent of the country to match the effect of perceiving the typical immigrant as being present illegally.

The comparison is not as drastic in Italy, where size misperceptions and legal status mischaracterizations are both significantly associated with more exclusionary attitudes. However, one would need to perceive immigrants to be more than half of the Italian population to match the effect of believing that the typical immigrant is undocumented. This hypothetical estimate is nearly 5.7 times the actual size and more than twice the mean estimated size. The pattern in Spain is similar with a size estimate of 33.7 – more than 2.3 times the actual size – needed to match the magnitude of the “mostly illegal” effect. Overall these predicted values suggest that legal status misperceptions are more likely to generate exclusionary attitudes than size misperceptions.

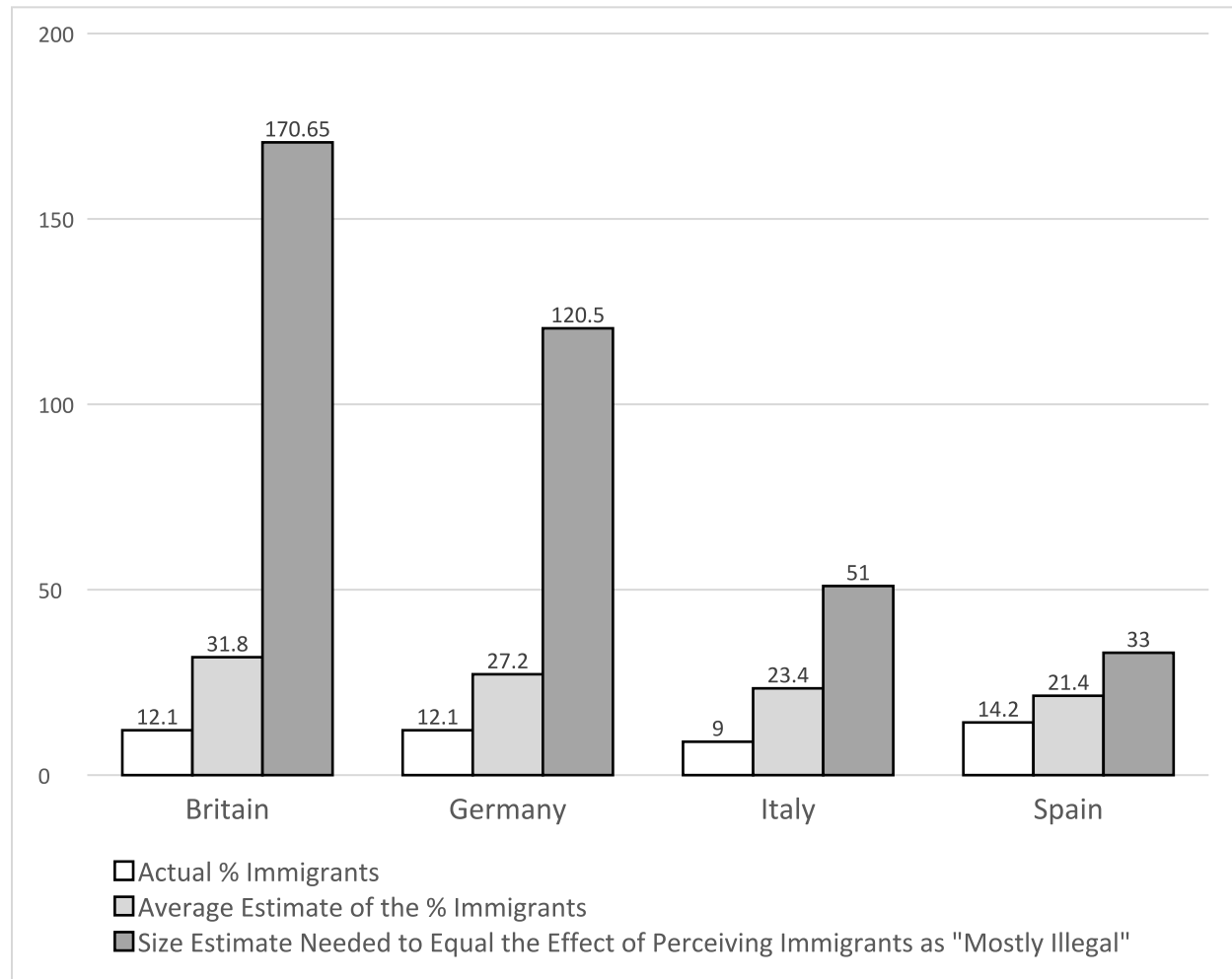
Table 3: Multiple Regressions Models Predicting Willingness to Exclude Immigrants across TATIS Countries

	USA		Great Britain		France		Germany		Spain		Italy	
	B	se	B	se	B	se	B	se	B	se	B	se
Perceived Size	-.004	.003	.003	.002	-.002	.003	.002	.00	.003	.004	.006+	.003
Perceived Legal Status												
Mostly Illegal	.341**	.118	.512***	.105	.385***	.105	.241+	.12	.099	.109	.306*	.117
Equally Legal and Illegal	.226	.263	.017	.242	.320*	.162	.187	.20	.115	.184	.110	.233
Don't Know	-.022	.166	.086	.168	.359*	.169	-.236	.25	-.094	.300	-.205	.209
Female	-.055	.119	-.346***	.088	.006	.077	-.203**	.07	-.061	.093	-.110	.098
Age	.012***	.003	.009***	.003	.001	.002	.004+	.00	.004	.004	.003	.003
Education												
Secondary School	.120	.222	-.139	.140	.189+	.104	-.150	.10	.023	.124	.027	.112
College	.193	.223	-.083	.131	-.025	.104	-.039	.16	-.190	.117	-.267+	.144
Post Graduate	-.065	.226	-.446*	.186	.146	.130	-.125	.09	.344	.235	-.424	.308
Conservatism	.076+	.046	.155***	.033	.127***	.031	.124***	.03	.106**	.034	.105**	.036
Locality												
Suburb	-.075	.164	.361**	.123	-.020	.134	.094	.11	-.040	.196	.059	.167
Town	-.181	.179	.139	.121	-.188	.118	.191+	.10	.056	.141	.041	.116
Country Village	.173	.260	.272*	.138	-.037	.122	.212+	.12	.061	.130	.029	.189
Rural Area	-.090	.245	-.294	.184	.292+	.168	.315+	.18	-.446	.297	-.300	.381
Cognitive Availability												
Immigrant Family												
One foreign born parent	.011	.214	.111	.158	-.080	.124	.026	.20	-.195	.339	.306	.218

<i>Two foreign born parents</i>	.198	.272	.077	.171	.073	.137	.518*	.21				
Immigrant Friends								2				
<i>Yes, a Few</i>	-.421**	.144	-.106	.093	-.174+	.096	.068	.08				
								4				
<i>Yes, Many</i>	-.500**	.187	-.379**	.145	-.338**	.141	-.242+	.13				
								5				
Constant	1.491**	0.45	1.410**	.303	1.874**	.242	1.553**	.25				
F-statistic	4.27***	6	8.62***	.303	4.15***	.242	5.74***	3				
R-squared	.223		.389		.234		.338					
Observations	406		398		421		407					

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, +p<.10; Note that in Spain and Italy, the Immigrant Family categories were combined because of sparse cells. All models include a set of country-specific region fixed effects (not shown).

Figure 4: Effect Size Comparisons (Population Innumeracy and Legal Status Mischaracterizations) From Models Predicting Willingness to Exclude Immigrants (Table 3)



Discussion

Recent headlines point to the dawn of the “post-truth” era in the U.S. and Western Europe (Norman 2016; Economist 2016). In fact, “post-truth” was named the 2016 Word of the Year by the Oxford Dictionary, who define it as circumstances under which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford 2016). Researchers interested in perceptions about immigrant populations have been documenting such “alternative facts” in people’s heads for decades. The tendency for individuals to base their views on the immigration they imagine, rather than what actually exists is troubling and raises many questions about the consequences of factual ignorance. The current analysis considered the extent of two types of faulty information about immigrants across six Western nations and examined whether both forms can influence one’s willingness to exclude immigrants. The main findings and implications for future research are discussed next.

Ignorance is Pervasive, but Variable across Nations

Quantitative ignorance exists in nearly every place that researchers have looked and the current study finds similarly. Over-estimation is the norm in all of the countries considered. However, ignorance regarding immigrants extends beyond questions about population size. Qualitative misperceptions about the legal status of the typical immigrant exist at non-trivial levels in each context. However, there is considerable variation, ranging from over 80 percent correct in Germany to only 21 percent correct in Italy. Further, there is also variation across contexts in terms of which misperception is more pervasive. Size misperceptions are more dominant in the U.S., Germany, France, and Britain, while legal status misperceptions are more common in Spain and Italy.

Some of this variation may be a result of actual population sizes. The U.S. and Italy, which exhibited the largest proportions of individuals mischaracterizing the typical immigrant as being present illegally, also have the largest portions of unauthorized immigrants relative to their total immigrant populations. Conversely, a large majority of Germans accurately characterize the typical immigrant as having documentation. While Germany has a large immigrant population, its relative proportion of undocumented migrants is the smallest in the current sample. This suggests that misperceptions may have some grounding in reality, despite being exaggerated. However, with only six sampled nations, one can only speculate in this regard.

Another possibility that could drive misperceptions is a country's status point of entry for migrants and proximity to source countries. The U.S.-Mexico border acting as the point of entry for a large portion of undocumented migrants has made the issue widely publicized and particularly contentious, which may contribute to widespread overgeneralization. Italy and Spain, the countries with the highest and third-highest levels of legal status mischaracterization in the sample, similarly have become focal points in Europe for undocumented immigration given their proximity to Africa. As a result, it is likely that unauthorized migration receives greater media attention in these countries, which can contribute to the cognitive availability of the typical citizen. Unfortunately, measures of media exposure are not available in the TATIS, precluding further exploration of this possibility.

Regardless, legal status misperceptions are an important component of the imagined immigration for researchers to continue examining because it is both verifiable and prone to misunderstanding. However, there are potentially many others that should be considered as well. Whether the typical immigrant depends on government assistance, is employed, possesses host country language abilities, or is involved in crime or terrorism, are also verifiable and could be valuable points of ignorance for researchers to understand. Particularly in studies that analyze size perceptions, it is necessary to consider the totality of ignorance by also including measures of qualitative mischaracterizations. This is true especially because the latter seem to be more strongly associated with one's willingness to exclude immigrants than the former.

Legal Status Mischaracterizations Are Associated with more Exclusionary Views

The current study considered one's willingness to exclude immigrants might be influenced by misperceptions. Such an outcome is timely, as many nations have recently struggled to incorporate an influx of migrants. Particularly in the wake of the European

Migration Crisis, it is essential to understand why individuals might support or oppose exclusionary immigration policies.

Legal status mischaracterizations seem to be consequential as believing that the typical immigrant is present illegally is associated with more exclusionary positions in five of the six countries considered. Undocumented immigrants represent a population about which people hold particularly negative attitudes (Lyons, Coursey, and Kenworthy 2013; Berg 2009; Hood and Morris 1998; Goo 2015). Thus, if individuals imagine this maligned category when they think of immigrants it is logical that they will desire more exclusionary policies, as the current results suggest.

This pattern raises further questions about what other consequences might arise from such distorted worldviews. For one, determining the degree to which an incorrectly imagined immigration contributes to the rise of anti-immigrant politicians like Donald Trump in the U.S., or the success of “Brexit” in the U.K., could be a useful task for future research. When claims-makers repeat accusations of immigrants harming society or not respecting host country laws and culture it will likely find eager adopters among those who already believe in a reality where the typical immigrant is present “illegally” or possesses other undesirable characteristics.

It is important to note however, that the cross-sectional design of the TATIS data represents a weakness of the current study. This author assumes that perceptions of legal status and population size exist prior to one’s willingness to exclude immigrants, but this cannot be confirmed here. Determining the correct sequence between misperceptions and policy preferences remains an important task for future research. Regardless, the associations found in the current study provide a justification for the continued consideration of qualitative mischaracterizations alongside quantitative misperceptions.

Not All Misperceptions Are Created Equal

Interestingly the current study finds that population size misperceptions did not exhibit a strong or consistent effect on one’s willingness to exclude migrants. In fact, they reached significance in only one of this six countries considered. This counters much of the existing literature, which consistently finds that size misperceptions predict support for anti-immigrant policy positions (Sides and Citrin 2007; Herda 2013; Semyonov et al. 2004). Rather, the current study suggests that qualitative misperceptions are more consequential for such positions.

Only Italy yielded a significant size perceptions association, but this was small relative to the corresponding legal status mischaracterization effect. An Italian would need to perceive the immigrant population to be nearly five times larger than the actual size to match the impact of viewing the typical immigrant as having illegal status. The remaining countries all demonstrate non-significant, near zero effects for size misperceptions.

This pattern may differ from the existing literature because it is common for other analyses to combine data from multiple countries, producing larger sample sizes. For example, the widely used 2002 European Social Survey contains 22 nations, each with over 1000 observations. The resulting regression models contain roughly 10 times more observations than the combined total across the current models, yielding greater estimation power and more significant coefficients. For this reason, the effects of size misperceptions may be overstated in the existing literature.

Research on population size misperceptions often understands their consequences through group threat theory (Blalock 1967; Quillian 1995; 1996). It is logical to assume that if

larger out-groups are more threatening, those who *perceive* out-groups to be larger will express more feelings of threat. However, the current findings suggest that the misperceptions-threat connection may be more complicated. How individuals perceive population size does not seem to be as important as how they imagine certain qualitative characteristics of the population. In other words, a large population may not be as threatening as a “mostly illegal” one. This opens the possibility that a small out-group population can be a source of threat if it is viewed as having undesirable traits. Perhaps a large out-group may be viewed as unthreatening if it is associated with desirable traits. It would be useful for future research to examine the link between ignorance and threat perceptions with these possibilities in mind.

It is clear that in order to understand immigrant-related ignorance and its consequences, researchers must now consider multiple bases of ignorance simultaneously. It seems that in certain contexts, some forms of ignorance are consequential, while they may have little or no effect elsewhere (i.e. legal status misperceptions in Britain vs. Spain). This may depend on the particular climate surrounding immigrants in a given country and the issues that are most salient and contentious (i.e. typical legal status in the U.S. or perhaps the religion of the typical immigrant in Germany or France). A useful task for future researchers would be to explore country-specific areas of ignorance to determine which types are most consequential and where.

Conclusion

Ordinary citizens express ignorance when it comes to immigrant and minority populations. They are unsure of how many there are, why they are present, where they are coming from, and their legal status, among many other possible things. This study confirms that legal status misperceptions exist in multiple countries and appear to generate more exclusionary attitudes in many. It also highlights that immigrant population size misperceptions may not be the most important form of ignorance, contrary to the focus of recent literature. Ideally the current findings will generate an increased focus on respondents’ totality of ignorance and how it can motivate individuals to support anti-immigrant policies. Unfortunately, there are potential dangers if the immigration that citizens imagine can motivate actions and policy preferences. Perhaps through a more comprehensive consideration of this ignorance, we will determine ways to generate a more well-informed and tolerant public.

Endnotes

¹ While this adjective is controversial, the current study uses it occasionally to reflect the question wording from the TATIS survey.

² By definition, undocumented populations are clandestine and difficult to count accurately. These data are presented as rough estimates with the goal of establishing broadly that if one imagines the typical immigrant as undocumented, they are misperceiving the reality.

³ Half of the TATIS sample was asked about their perceptions in their country as a whole and half about their local community. Respondents were randomly assigned to each group as part of an experiment conducted by the survey administrators. As a check, the current author considered the degree to which respondents in both groups differed on all other variables to ensure that dropping the latter group did not introduce selection into the data. The results indicated no significant differences between the two groups in terms of the demographic, cognitive, or the policy position variables.

⁴ The option of “equal” was chosen rarely in the analytical sample, leading to relatively small cell sizes in some contexts. However, alternative models in which the category “equal” is included with the “mostly illegal” category, included with the “don’t know” category, or dropped altogether (not shown) largely mirror those presented.

⁵ In the full sample, 81.46 percent of cases contain no missing observations. Among individuals with missing responses, over 80 percent are missing on only a single variable. The largest percentage missing is on the political conservatism variable (10.09 percent) followed by education (4.43 percent). All regression models were also estimated using list-wise deletion (not shown). The magnitudes and significance patterns are similar to those presented.

⁶ These models present the size perception effects controlling for legal status mischaracterizations. Additional models were estimated that omit the latter (not shown), which yield magnitudes and significance patterns that mirror those presented. The unique exception is in Britain where the size misperception association is statistically significant ($b = .007$; $p = .001$) without controlling for legal status misperceptions. Models that omit size perceptions all yield legal status perception effects that mirror the results presented.

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